

Message Text

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PAGE 01 STATE 208743
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INFORM CONSULS

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SUBJECT: FDA-USDA STATEMENT ON NITRITES

1. ON AUGUST 11, 1978 FDA AND USDA ISSUED A JOINT STATE-
MENT ON THE USE OF NITRITES IN MEAT,POULTRY, AND FISH. THE
STATEMENT IS QUOTED BELOW AND WAS ALSO SUPPLIED TO ALL
FOREIGN EMBASSIES IN WASHINGTON. YOU MAY WISH TO SUPPLY
THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT TO INTERESTED AGENCIES OF HOST
GOVERNMENT AT YOUR DISCRETION.

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PAGE 02 STATE 208743

2. "THE USE OF NITRITE TO PRESERVE AND TO COLOR AND FLAVOR
CURED MEATS, POULTRY AND FISH HAS BEEN THE SOURCE OF
SCIENTIFIC DEBATE AND PUBLIC CONTROVERSY FOR A DECADE.

3. SINCE THE EARLY 1960'S, SCIENTISTS HAVE KNOWN THAT
NITRITE COMBINED WITH CERTAIN CHEMICALS CAN FORM NITROSAMINES

A FAMILY OF CHEMICALS KNOWN TO PRODUCE CANCER IN TEST ANIMALS.

4. WE ARE NOW CONFRONTED WITH NEW CONCERNS ABOUT NITRITE. A STUDY RECENTLY COMPLETED FOR FDA BY THE MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY STRONGLY SUGGESTS THAT NITRITE PRODUCES CANCER OF THE LYMPHATIC SYSTEM IN TEST ANIMALS. THE MECHANISM IS CLEARLY DISTINCT FROM THAT OF NITROSAMINES.

5. ALMOST THIRTEEN PERCENT OF THE TEST ANIMALS RECEIVING NITRITE CONTRACTED CANCER OF THE LYMPH SYSTEM, WHEREAS EIGHT PERCENT OF THOSE RECEIVING NO NITRITE CONTRACTED CANCER. THE DIFFERENCE IS SIGNIFICANT STATISTICALLY AND LEADS US TO THE CONCERN THAT NITRITE MAY INCREASE THE INCIDENCE OF HUMAN CANCER.

6. ABOUT 20 PERCENT OF THE AVERAGE HUMAN DIETARY EXPOSURE TO NITRITES NOW COMES FROM CURED FOOD PRODUCTS. THE REMAINING 80 PERCENT COMES FROM NITRATE IN OTHER SOURCES OF HUMAN FOOD. NITRATE EXISTS, FOR EXAMPLE, IN SUBSTANTIAL QUANTITIES IN SPINACH AND OTHER LEAFY VEGETABLES AND IN DRINKING WATER. BACTERIA IN OUR MOUTHS AND DIGESTIVE TRACTS CONVERT NITRATE AND OTHER NITROGEN-CONTAINING COMPOUNDS INTO NITRITE.

7. THE RESULTS OF THE MIT EXPERIMENTS NEVERTHELESS INDICATE UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

PAGE 03 STATE 208743

THAT THE USE OF NITRITE AS A DELIBERATE ADDITIVE TO FOOD MAY POSE A HAZARD TO HUMAN HEALTH. HOWEVER, NITRITE ALSO PROTECTS AGAINST THE FORMATION OF BOTULINUM TOXIN, A DEADLY FOOD POISON. WE THUS ARE PRESENTED WITH A DIFFICULT BALANCE OF RISKS.

8. WE MUST WEIGH THE RISK ASSOCIATED WITH NITRITE ADDED TO FOOD AGAINST THE HEALTH RISK FROM NOT ADDING IT. ON THE ONE HAND, NITRITE MAKES IT POSSIBLE FOR CURED MEATS, POULTRY AND FISH TO BE PROCESSED, TRANSPORTED, STORED AND SOLD WITHOUT CAREFUL ATTENTION TO REFRIGERATION. ON THE OTHER HAND, NITRITE MAY POSE A POTENTIAL CANCER RISK TO HUMANS.

9. IN THE PAST WE HAVE MOVED WITHOUT HESITATION TO BAN OUTRIGHT A NUMBER OF FOOD ADDITIVES WHEN THEY POSE A HAZARD TO HUMAN HEALTH. IN SUCH CASES FDA IS BOUND BY LAW TO ELIMINATE THESE SUBSTANCES, AND HAS ALWAYS DONE SO IN THE PAST WITH THE FIRM CONVICTION THAT THIS ACTION IS SOUND LAW, RESPONSIBLE REGULATION AND WISE HEALTH POLICY. SIMILARLY, USDA IS BOUND BY LAW TO ELIMINATE FROM THE FOODS UNDER THEIR JURISDICTION SUBSTANCES WHICH ARE HARMFUL.

10. IN THIS CASE THE NEED TO BALANCE TWO KINDS OF HEALTH RISKS - ONE BY TAKING NITRITE OUT OF FOOD AND THE OTHER BY LEAVING IT IN - CREATES A DIFFICULT CHALLENGE. WE ARE NOW ASSESSING SEVERAL OPTIONS, WITH THE GOAL OF PROVIDING MAXIMUM PUBLIC PROTECTION CONSISTENT WITH THE LAW. AS SOON AS THIS EFFORT HAS BEEN COMPLETED, AN ANNOUNCEMENT OF OUR DECISION WILL BE MADE. IN THE MEANTIME, THE MIT STUDY IS BEING PLACED IN THE PUBLIC RECORD SO THAT THE PROCESS OF EXTERNAL SCIENTIFIC SCRUTINY CAN COMMENCE." VANCE

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